FAASTeam
Safer Skies Through Education

FAA Aviation Safety

CFIT and Plan Continuation Bias

Research conducted by the General Aviation Joint Safety Committee's (GAJSC) Controlled Flight into Terrain (CFIT) work group report suggests that human bias – particularly plan continuation bias – may be a significant factor in CFIT accidents. It's important for pilots to know how these human biases could negatively influence pilot decision making, as well as learn how to more effectively manage things that we can control and plan for those that are beyond our control.

Get-There-Itis

Let's face it. Flying can be stressful. Pilots are routinely subject to pressure on several fronts. It could be pressure to get to a special event on time, or to not want to let a friend or family member down by being unable to complete a flight. We might succumb to that pressure, even when faced with red flags before or during the flight that would otherwise result in a change in plans or no-go decision.

Psychologists call the continuation of an original plan even when information suggests the plan should be abandoned **plan continuation bias**. Pilots more commonly refer to it as get-there-itis. It's an unconscious bias that can appear stronger the closer you get to accomplishing an activity (e.g., approach to landing).

During a flight, a pilot may encounter motivations to change plans or discontinue the flight, like a change in weather, low fuel, or encroaching darkness. However, these motivations are typically weaker than the initial motivation to complete the flight, so they get overlooked or excused away. These weaker motivations can stack up and may end up being stronger than the motivation to complete the flight. However, at that point, it may be too late to complete the flight in safely.

A pilot may become so focused on completing their mission that they also overlook serious flight hazards along the way, like elevated terrain or other obstructions, creating the potential for a CFIT accident. Pilots should realize that a diversion to an alternate should be deemed a success, not a failure. Just don't wait too long to divert, as this can greatly limit your options.

Seven Approaches, One Landing

A frightening example of this occurred on a Boeing 737 flight in 2015 from the Middle East to India. When the crew arrived at their destination, the airport was at Instrument Landing System (ILS) minimums. After a missed approach, the crew had a choice to divert to a Visual Flight

Continued on Next Page

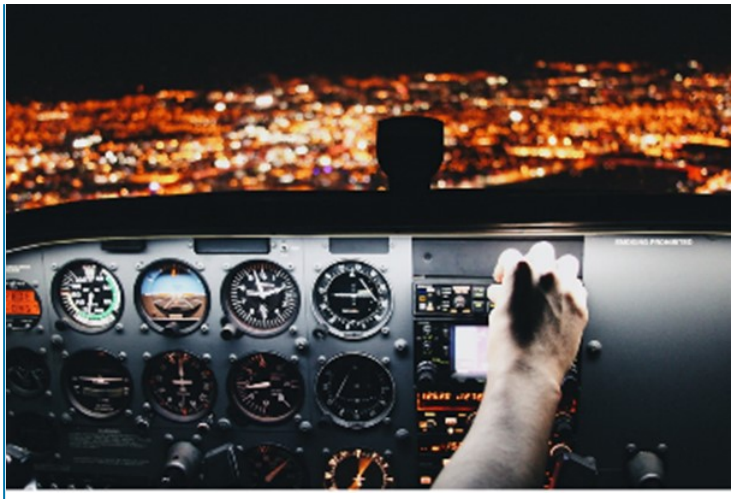
Rules (VFR) alternate 200 miles away, or an Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) alternate that was 100 miles closer. They had enough fuel to reach both. But the crew decided instead to keep trying the destination airport, despite ATC warnings.

After the third missed approach, the VFR option was now beyond range. They decided to fly to the IFR alternate where conditions were worsening. They flew three more missed approaches at the alternate before landing "in the blind" with a mere 15 minutes of fuel remaining. During that last approach, the aircraft also flew dangerously close to ground with terrain warnings audible in the cockpit. Thankfully there were no injuries and the aircraft did not sustain any damage.

Takeaways

Here are some key takeaway tips for helping combat plan continuation bias:

- **Perform realistic pre-flight planning** with alternatives. Thoroughly consider factors that could compromise your success and how a plan B, C, or D could help you safely deal with them. Having an alternate plan already worked out makes it much easier to switch gears. Make your passengers aware of this too to help manage expectations.
- During the flight, **continually and objectively assess** how well the flight is conforming to plan. How's the weather looking? Has there been a change in headwinds? How's your fuel? It's normal to have variations in your plan; just be sure they are noted and dealt with.
- **Deal with small problems** as soon as they are noticed and before they become big problems. A diversion to your alternate is a small problem, especially if you planned for it. Not having enough fuel to reach your alternate is a big problem.



- Make an effort to **remove the economic incentives** of plan continuation bias (i.e., budget for alternate transportation, hotels, etc.) Avoid having costs be a factor in your decision to divert or not go.
- Honest and objectively **assess your own performance capabilities**. Work with an instructor to develop a set of personal performance minimums.
- To be able to meet those performance minimums, be sure to **maintain proficiency**. A regular program of proficiency training with an instructor is best and we urge you to consider the FAA ***WINGS*** Pilot Proficiency Program bit.ly/WINGSPPP.

Resources

- Watch Plan Continuation Bias in 57 Seconds: youtu.be/f57BvLLiLEw
- *FAA Safety Briefing*: "Get-Home-It is: The Keys to Treating an Airborne Disease" (March/April 2013) faa.gov/newsroom/safety-briefing/faa-safety-briefing-marchapril-2013
- AC 61–134, *General Aviation CFIT Awareness* bit.ly/3tQV052
- CFIT Video — What More Can We Do? youtu.be/JBxg6hgbAr8

FLY SAFE
General Aviation Safety Enhancement Topics

#FlySafe on Blog
bit.ly/FlySafeMedium

#FlySafe Fact Sheets
bit.ly/FlySafePDF